

**Safe but Illiterate: Fighting Censorship in the Lafayette Public Library System**

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## **Safe but Illiterate: Fighting Censorship in the Lafayette Public Library System**

The end of summer has finally crept into fall. The sound of cicadas is quiet in the trees; the air is still dense enough to choke on; and the misanthropic students are all trying to return to their studies. Some will find that easier than others. For the newly driver-license-having teenager who has been chased out of the house by their family, it might mean finding cheap, alternative spots to be by themselves. The ever-important “Third Place.” (Oldenburg, 1999)

The teenager, we'll call them Ash for convenience's sake, climbs over the center console since the lock on the driver's side is broken. They get out of their borrowed car and trot through the parking lot with their head down. There isn't yet enough cloud cover to dampen the light. Then, there is a break in the relentless sun; shade under the walkway which leads to the ever-reliable white portico in front of the library doors.

### **The Challenge**

They have a routine to attend to, one which is common among their peers. (Becker, 2010) Word processors tend to not cooperate with them on their phone and their mother's laptop hasn't been turning on. Sitting at an empty computer, they start to fish their card out of their backpack. They've memorized the first few digits but can't keep most of it straight in their head. Upon typing in their card number they are met with an error. Upon typing it a second time they are met with an error. They go over each character slowly and deliberately, glancing back and forth between the screen and the card. The enter key goes down and gives them nothing but a third error for their efforts. Upon the extreme desire to avoid asking for help, they pick up their things and amble off into the stacks. The mobile version would have to do. They could work with that for just one essay.

In addition to their online word processors, there was also access to their PDFs to worry about. A physical copy would work just as well, but it's been lost for them in constant re-organizing. So, they tap the rows of stickered spines until they find what they need. It had recently been re-shelved in the adult section; nestled between some medical title and an adventure novel. Young adult literature seemed to be moved there more and more frequently.

Sometime later, nearing dark, they uncross their legs and emerge from the quiet corner they'd settled in. The library is closing. The kiosk is empty so they plan to once again skillfully avoid social interaction. Upon entering their card number, they are given an error for the fourth time that day. They wouldn't have any time to come back, so the book had to come home with them one way or another. With a yielding sigh, they hobble over to the desk. Then, they receive the news that their card is functioning exactly as intended. It has been automatically restricted due to their age, and full access would have to be restored with an in-person visit from a parent. They ask about alternatives, in case a parent is inaccessible during operating hours. Unfortunately, they are given none. (Taylor, 2024)

This common routine has been successfully disrupted in compliance with state law. A law that has determined that the discomfort of strangers, completely uninvolved with a minor's upbringing, is paramount to the accessibility of important educational materials. The issue outlined here results from one of many policy changes which aim to limit the reach of media deemed unacceptable by the current library board. Put plainly, censorship. This comes in tandem with harsher punishments for library workers who don't comply. Returning to the specific example of restricted cards, the automation of this process was recent. The option to restrict cards already existed. The only change is an inconvenience for parents who already chose not to utilize the option.

## The Big Idea

Opening the doors to a heavy-aired conference room, one would find a few rows of passionate speakers. Most have come to dozens of meetings before this one. Once public comment opens the room is filled with loud voices. One speaker, perhaps a disgruntled and still theoretical teenager, steps up to the podium and begins to say their piece. They echo the basic sentiments of the half-dozen people before them. Their handwritten notes, scribbled in whatever time they could sacrifice, are all piled up in front of the microphone. Despite their efforts, they are spared little efficacy once discussion resumes.

They slouch in their seat and scan the room. There is some quiet now as the podium is closed and the speakers are sitting. It would be dishonest to claim that there is only one opinion present. In fact, it's no minor point of contention, and not one person has a placid tone. There are scattered signs, political slogans, murmuring, and grunts. Some people are disaffected in their position as an audience because that's all they can be called. In so many words and droning proceedings, it is clear that public comment may be called for, but it is in no way entitled to response. Even the majority could be safely ignored without overwhelming numbers. The board rolls on with the predetermined vote and Ash's mind begins to wander.

The makeup of the room paints a picture that the sides are already set. All of the invested people are allocated to their aisles. It feels emptier than it ought to be. Between the scattered rows of loud voices one would expect twice the half-hearted ones. Rifling through their chicken-scratch notes on surveys and statistics, they see numbers which aren't present in the conference. The majority broadly disagrees with policies of these kinds. However, many within that majority never push against it. (Knight Foundation, 2024.) They don't have to be present, they only have to be in the argument. The vote concludes and a few closing words are said. They have their passionate half-dozen in an inconsequential meeting, what they need is to rally up the tepid thousand. How exactly that should be done is a matter still being settled.

## The How-To

Nestled in bed between final exam grades and black printed flyers there's a theoretical teenager racking their brain for clear action to take. The longer they think, the more the issue seems to overcomplicate itself. In the end it simply comes back to rousing people. Current awareness campaigns have already proven admirably effective. With every proposed restriction comes public outcry; slowly that outcry becomes impossible to ignore. Without physical attendance to meetings, without requiring much sacrifice, numbers have meaning. Even the shelving of house bills can be influenced by a certain volume of emails. (Witteveen, 2024). In that regard the aim is to continue what's already being done.

What seems to remain a problem is swaying people who lean the other direction. Dissatisfaction is present on both sides of the fence. For some it's too far and for others it's not far enough. Either way people see it as insufficient. Unfortunately, there's no comfortable compromise between the two. If there isn't a way to meet in the middle there has to be an alternative. So, Ash tries to picture it from an opposing viewpoint. Everything comes from a poor solution to a different perceived problem. Even from another perspective, reshelving books and restricting cards doesn't fully address the issue that it's trying to solve. Censorship cannot be all encompassing. The concepts and materials being guarded against will always be present in some form. Once the children being protected become adults that supposed protection suddenly stops. They're left without any experience in evaluating information on their own. That, more than anything, is what makes people vulnerable.

The simplest compromise rests there. If there are concerns over misinformation or distasteful media in public spaces, what will serve a child better is teaching them how to walk away. (Jolls, 2021) That comes without the caveats of enforcing personal beliefs onto others and remains a skill that is needed throughout adult life. Stressing media literacy as the safer, more agreeable route would hopefully help to reach those just on the other side of the fence.

## **The Impact & Call to Action**

Because numbers are half of what's needed, the spread of information is half of what can be done. In talking to unaware friends or linking news articles on social media; in stressing to the disinterested that clear harm is being done but can be helped; in engaging with others openly and empathically about solutions more appealing and effective for everyone, a sizable step is taken towards improvement. Among those numbers, the ones who are especially invested have meetings to attend and lobbies to hold. That is not the main objective being sought out. The great many who don't have such time, money or energy to spend are more than essential. Those several tepid voices speaking amongst themselves and calling or writing their legislators, that's most of what needs to be asked from the public at large.

There is not so much of a positive outcome to aim for, but the avoidance of a negative one. Avoiding responsibility being placed on governmental bodies to broadly codify what is an almost entirely subjective matter, and avoiding undue stress on parents, students and even library staff under threat of legal action. Of course, one can hope for better. Ease of access to information, especially that which is vetted on some level as in a library, more often than not is beneficial. Furthermore, a greater push for information literacy could only do good. Even basic advice allows people to better evaluate what they are seeing. (Altay et al., 2024) It's regardless of what exactly is to be changed that the current route cannot continue. In the end it comes to tepid voices, reasonable debates, and another day under the white portico in front of the library doors.

The end of summer has finally crept again into fall. Recent highschool graduates are occupying their days with fighting for their choice causes; the air is unsure and anxious; and the misanthropic students are all trying to return to their studies. For the newest driver's-license-having teenager, this means going to see what kind of a third place is left. For the reader, for whom I will break the narrative to address, this means deciding what kind of a third place that will be.

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